Urban Informality as a Space of Uneven and Unplanned Development: The Street Vending Ban in Bangkok*

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| Abstract |

Post-dualist urban theorists have conceptualised urban informality as a social, political, and historical construct with the potential to reveal complex power relations in the uneven development of cities. This paper extends the post-dualist discourse by examining the forces and actors behind the production and restructuring (creative destruction) of urban informal spaces, focusing on street vending spaces in Bangkok. Despite Bangkok's reputation as the world's best street food capital, these spaces have faced significant pressure from a government-imposed ban, accompanied by an accelerated modernisation project since the 2014 coup. In this context of disappearing street vending spaces, this paper investigates how and why such urban informal spaces have been restructured. It critiques urban informality as an organising logic that operates as a form of governmentality while proposing an alternative conceptualisation of

urban informality as a realm of ambiguity and messiness, as well as a site of interaction between formal and informal spaces in Asian cities. To achieve this, the paper examines the role of urban informality in Bangkok's modernisation process, focusing on the Thai government's ban on street vending and its varied impacts. Drawing on field observations and interviews conducted at six street vending sites in Bangkok, the findings highlight the importance of accounting for diversity, interconnectedness, and ambiguity in analysing urban public space restructuring and in formulating policy solutions. The results suggest that the dialectical relationship between differentiation and equalisation within capitalism is a key driving force behind the disappearance of street vending spaces in Bangkok. The capitalist state, urban financial elites (developers), and the growing middle class are identified as the primary actors in this process. Recognising the limitations of urban informality as an all-encompassing concept, the paper emphasises the need to reconceptualise urban informality through the lens of unplanned development, which is inherently site- and context-specific.

Key Words: Urban informality, uneven development, unplanned development, creative destruction, street vending ban, Bangkok, Thailand

Ⅰ. INTRODUCTION

Renowned as the world's best street food capital, Bangkok has recently seen its street vending spaces come under significant pressure from a government-led ban, coupled with an accelerated modernisation agenda following the 2014 coup. Against this backdrop of diminishing street vending spaces, this paper explores the processes driving the restructuring of these urban informal spaces and investigates the mechanisms of these transformations.

This study seeks to critically examine the concept of urban informality as an organising logic that operates as a mechanism of governmentality. It also aims to propose a reconceptualisation of urban informality as a realm of ambiguity and complexity－a space where formal and informal elements intersect and interact, particularly within the context of Asian cities. Post-dualist urban theorists have redefined urban informality as a social, political, and historical construct, revealing its potential to uncover the intricate power dynamics underlying the uneven development of cities. Building on this post-dualist perspective, this paper aims to further the discussion by analysing the forces and actors involved in the production and restructuring－what David Harvey would call "creative destruction"－ of urban informal spaces, with a specific focus on street vending spaces in Bangkok.

To address the research question, field observations of street vending places and interviews with street vendors were conducted across six sites in Bangkok in March, May, and August 2018. These sites were intentionally selected by the author to showcase the diversity, multidimensionality, and interconnected nature of urban spaces (both formal and informal) through comparative analysis. Additionally, interviews with street vendors, government officials, academics, and civil society activists were carried out to triangulate findings and gain insights from multiple perspectives on the implications and impacts of the street vending ban.

The year 2018 marks the period immediately following the implementation of the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) "Street Vending Management Plan to Return the Pavements to

Bangkok Pedestrians 2015-2017," a master plan devised by the BMA to effectively reduce street vending. This period reflects the initial direct effects of the policy, highlighting the complexities and disruptions that emerged as the master plan was enforced. In fact, from 2018 onwards, the BMA's policy of eliminating street vending areas was aggressively expanded. Consequently, informal urban spaces have remained under continuous threat, generating various tensions that persist to this day.

Bankok's street vendor ban is not a short-term event but a policy shaped by the contexts of urban policy, the informal space, and power dynamics. The case of Bangkok in 2018 represents a turning point in the spatial transformations of the urbanisation process. This study analyses the social responses and policy effects observed in the early stages of this conflict. While this research focuses on the initial data from the policy's implementation in 2018, it has the potential to offer further insights through continuous observation of subsequent changes and comparative studies with other cases.

The structure of the paper is as follows: Section 2 examines the historical evolution of urban informality as a theoretical concept. Section 3 delves into Bangkok's modernisation process, and the resulting formalisation strategies that redefine urban informality, with a particular focus on the street vending ban as a case study of state-led spatial ordering. Section 4 presents a detailed analysis of the ban's impacts, drawing on findings from field observations and interviews. Section 5 discusses the implications of these findings.

II. CONCEPTUALISING URBAN INFORMALITY

Urban informal spaces, such as slums, squatter settlements, and street trading zones, are typically seen as exceptional and irregular, often lacking legal land rights. In contrast, urban formal spaces hold legal entitlements. The concept of urban informality emerged in the 1950s when scholars classified squatting and street trading as "not formal," often with negative connotations linking them to illegality, poverty, and marginality, reinforcing the "culture of poverty" narrative (Abrams 1966; Lewis 1967; Lloyd 1979).

Contrary to this view, some scholars see urban informal spaces as solutions rather than problems, arguing that informality is not inherently linked to poverty or marginality. They highlight the integration of informal and formal sectors and advocate recognising the agency of urban poor residents in "self-help" initiatives. Their solution involves legalising informal activities to unlock hidden assets and resources (Turner 1972; De Soto 2000).

However, the legalist perspective has faced criticism from structuralist scholars, who argue that the urban informal sector is not merely a legal workaround but a structural outcome of capitalist development crises (Mangin 1967; Rakowski 1994; Davis 2006). Structuralists contend that informality cannot be understood without considering systemic inequalities, as the formal sector actively relies on the informal economy to sustain its profitability by outsourcing production to informal enterprises, which operate with fewer regulatory constraints and provide cheaper labour and materials. At the same time, the informal economy depends on the formal sector

for market opportunities and financial flows, creating a mutually dependent relationship. This interdependence suggests that informality is not a temporary or residual phenomenon but an inherent and persistent feature of capitalist economies. (Portes et al. 1989)

According to Lombard and Meth (2017), both legalist and structuralist perspectives share a common limitation: they treat informality and formality as fundamentally separate spheres. This dualistic understanding has been criticised for oversimplifying the complexities of "urban informality." Post-dualist scholars instead highlight the interconnectedness of formal and informal sectors, advocating for "urban informalities" to reflect the multiple realities, power dynamics, and social relations shaping cities.

Challenging Western-centric theories, postcolonial urban scholars frame informality as a form of governmentality, asking, "Who defines informality, and why?"—a question that exposes the political processes shaping informality as a social and historical construct. Roy (2005: 148) defines informality as "an organising logic, a system of norms that governs the process of urban transformation itself," emphasising spatial inequality (Roy 2011b: 233). Her works (2005, 2011a, 2011b, 2012) and those of Roy and AlSayyad (2004) have been foundational for post-dualist theorists.

McFarlane (2012: 106) reconceptualises informality and formality as interrelated concepts. By extending the discussion to include major actors involved in urban planning, such as capitalist states and developers, he underscores the potential of urban informality to expose power relations and illuminate the complex processes and politics shaping urban spaces. McFarlane employs the concept of informality

as a form of urban critique, describing it as "a basis for rethinking not just informalities, but planning itself, in cities across the Global South."

As discussed, post-dualist and postcolonial scholars reconceptualise urban informality as a social, political, and historical construct shaped by power relations. This paper critically examines urban informality as a state's legibility and simplification project (Scott 1998) while advocating for its reconceptualisation as a realm of ambiguity where formal and informal spaces intersect in Asian cities (Chalana and Hou 2016: 9). Building on this discourse, it examines the forces and actors driving the production and restructuring of urban informal spaces, focusing on Bangkok's street vending.

The BMA's framing of street vending as "purely informal" and therefore "illegal" oversimplifies its complexities—including its cultural heritage and economic contributions—and ignores the power dynamics at play between privileged formal sectors and marginalised urban communities. Critics have challenged modernist planners' negative perceptions of street vending as a public nuisance and misuse of public space (Onodugo et al. 2016: 95). As Van Schendel and Abraham (2005) noted, the boundary between "illegal" and "illicit" is not merely a legal issue but is variable depending on social, political, and historical contexts. (See also Bhowmik 2010)

Within the broader context of disappearing street vending, this paper explores how and why urban public spaces—both formal and informal—are being restructured. Here, street vending is understood as a behaviour, street vendors as actors, and the spaces they occupy as public spaces, encompassing both formal and informal dimensions.

To address this research question, this paper draws on the theories

of uneven development and unplanned development. David Harvey (2006, 2012, 2014) and Neil Smith (1984) argue that capitalism perpetuates itself by continuously restructuring spaces through the dialectical forces of differentiation and equalisation. Differentiation enhances market exchanges by leveraging spatial advantages, while equalisation seeks to create a uniform global capitalist market through standardisation. These opposing yet interrelated forces not only reshape urban informal spaces but also redefine the concept of informality itself, serving as a tool of governmentality to justify the removal of street vending spaces.

Jonathan Rigg (2012, 2016) offers the theory of unplanned development, which challenges the idea of rational, state-led development planning. He emphasises that development unfolds contingently through individual agency, everyday events, and socio-cultural shifts, rather than through grand structures and predictable interventions. By "bringing people back" into development discourse, Rigg highlights the importance of recognising human circumstances. This perspective provides valuable insights for shaping policies on street vending spaces.

Ⅲ. BANGKOK'S MODERNISATION AND STREET VENDING BAN

1. Urban informality in the modernisation process of Bangkok

Even though Bangkok has long been Thailand's political,

economic, and social core, its modern form emerged in the early 1780s (Askew 1993). During the fourth and fifth Chakkri reigns (1851-1910), Bangkok transitioned from a sacred city to a modern urban centre, accelerating its role as Thailand's hub of modernisation (O'Connor 1990). Modernisation was state-driven, with Chulalongkorn's reforms centralising political power. However, Bangkok also became a space for independent economic activities beyond state control, including informal trade and services that later became integral to the city's urban fabric (Askew 2002: 33–34).

Askew (2002: 37) highlights Bangkok's rapid urban growth from 1883 to 1913, making it twelve times the size of Chiang Mai by 1913. As the city expanded, informal economic activities grew alongside formal urban developments. By the 1950s, Thailand's shift to an export-oriented economy further transformed Bangkok into a global metropolis, attracting internal migration from rural provinces, particularly Isaan, for labour in construction, manufacturing, and services. These migrants not only contributed to the formal economy but also shaped informal urban spaces, such as street vending, which became an efficient means of supplying food and necessities to the city's growing population (Nirathron 2010). Some scholars describe this process as internal colonisation, where rural human and social capital were exploited to establish Bangkok as Thailand's economic and political centre (Sawasdee 2016).

Since the 1980s, trade liberalisation and globalisation have caused employment fluctuations in Thailand. The late 1990s Asian Financial Crisis further expanded urban informality, as many laid-off workers turned to street vending instead of returning to rural areas (Nirathron

2010; Walsh 2010; Maneepong and Walsh 2013). Recognising the role of street vending in urban resilience and income generation, the government provided financial support to struggling vendors during this period (Boonjubun 2017; Nirathron 2010: 149). However, this support was largely a crisis-driven measure rather than a long-term strategy for an inclusive urban economy.

As the economy recovered in the 2000s, government attitudes towards urban informality shifted. With a growing middle class, street vendors, once seen as essential, came to be viewed as obstructions. Middle-class consumption patterns increasingly favoured convenience stores, chain restaurants, and shopping malls over traditional street markets. Meanwhile, rising capital investment in real estate further reduced the spaces available for informal vendors. Despite these changes, street vending remains a vital part of Bangkok's urban life, continuing to serve lower-income residents and workers while adapting to shifting economic and regulatory conditions (Walsh 2010; Maneepong and Walsh 2013).

Bangkok's modernisation has shaped the evolution of urban informality, influenced by power dynamics among the state, urban elites, the middle class, and the urban poor (Rigg 2016). Informality and formality are deeply intertwined in Bangkok's urban landscape. However, in recent years, the Thai government has increasingly framed street vendors as informal in a way that justifies their removal, reflecting broader tensions between economic modernisation and the survival of traditional urban livelihoods.

2. Street vending ban in Bangkok

Although the Thai government's policies on street vending have long been ambiguous and inconsistent (Kusakabe 2006; Boonjubun 2017), the BMA's stance became clear in recent years. The "BMA's Street Vending Management Plan to Return the Pavements to Bangkok Pedestrians (2015 - 2017)" (hereinafter the Master Plan) aligned with the military-led National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO)'s campaign to secure public spaces (Boonjubun 2017). Implemented by the City Law Enforcement Department (*Thetsakit*) and 50 district offices, the Master Plan effectively functioned as a ban on pavement vending, leading to widespread removals. While such a ban had long existed, its enforcement had never been so aggressive, nor had it involved forced evictions (civil society activists, Interview notes, 2 March 2018).

The BMA, responsible for policymaking, and *Thetsakit,* the enforcement body regulating pavements, have distinct yet interconnected roles. *Thetsakit,* with both administrative and police functions, has regulated street vending since 1985, controlling items, locations, and trading hours (*Thetsakit* division head, male, Interview notes, 22 May 2018). The official stated that the Master Plan was driven by middle-class demands for unobstructed public spaces and property owners' concerns over cleanliness.

To facilitate urban restructuring, the BMA introduced *jud-phonphan* in 2005, meaning "loosely managed areas" or "temporarily allowed areas." This framework mapped street vending zones, setting priorities for their removal. Initially, 783 *jud-phonphan* areas were identified,

which the Master Plan sought to reduce from 451 to 232 between 2015 and 2017. By 2018, the target had been met, leaving 232 *jud-phonphan* with varying permitted operating hours. On Mondays, all vendors in these areas must close for pavement cleaning. Those wishing to trade on Mondays or outside permitted hours must relocate to private spaces and pay rent.

However, a civil society activist conducting action research on street vending recalls, "The ban was suddenly imposed, and the eviction process was implemented very quickly." (a civil society activist, female, Interview notes, 23 May 2018). She claims that before the ban, *Thetsakit* played a role in managing pavements, primarily by collecting a 500-baht monthly cleaning fee from vendors and issuing receipts. In 2015, however, a sudden policy shift banned all vendors outside *jud-phonphan* areas, leading to forceful evictions. The first target was Sukhumvit Road, a highly modernised area, while popular tourist zones like Khaosan and Yaowarat were initially exempted.[1]

As the number of *jud-phonphan* areas decreased, competition for permitted spots among vendors intensified. Since the government maintains a list of registered vendors in each *jud-phonphan,* unregistered vendors cannot trade there, making it difficult for displaced vendors to find new locations. Once removed, they typically have two options: relocating to government-designated areas or becoming mobile vendors. However, vendors often reject relocation areas due to their high rent or inconvenient locations, as explained by a *Thetsakit* division head (Interview notes, 22 May 2018).

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1) By 2018, Khaosan Road also became a target of the ban, and its regulation was showcased as a representative case. (See section 4.5 for details)

Figure 1. Before and after the operation at Pak-Klong-Talad (flower market) (provided by the *Thetsakit*)
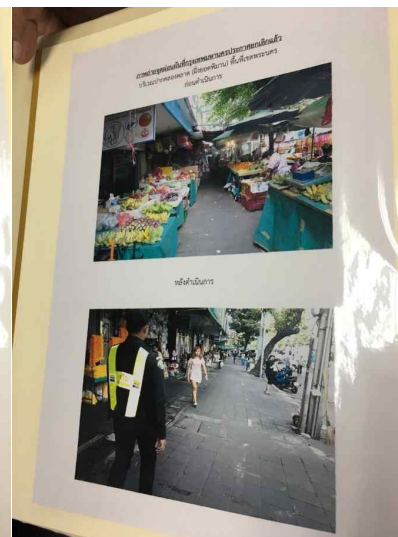

Figure 2. Before and after the operation at a local market (provided by the *Thetsakit*)
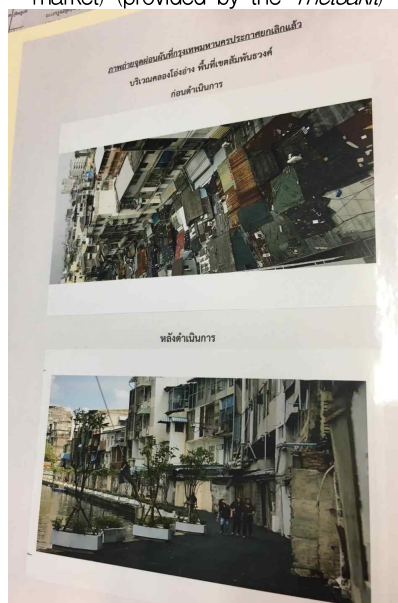

Figure 3. A canal-side market was converted into a walkway at Ong-ang Canal, Saphanlek (provided by the *Thetsakit*)
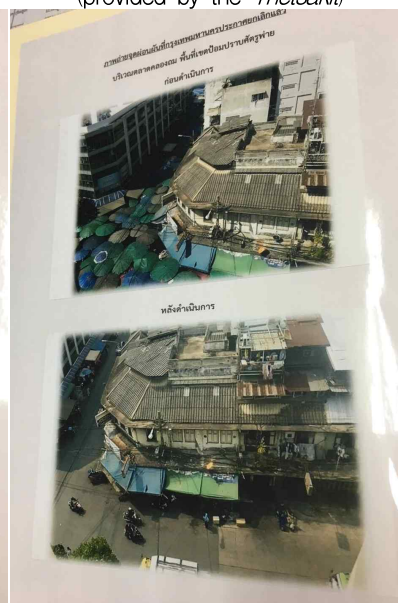

Figure 4. The operation enabled vehicle traffic in Klongthom Market (provided by the *Thetsakit*)

Furthermore, areas not included in the BMA's survey became *jud-phonphon,* meaning "undocumented areas." Civil society activists and street vendor representatives I interviewed stated that while the BMA aimed to regulate the city by designating *jud-phonphan* as "documented but loosely managed" or "temporarily allowed" areas before eliminating them, this process ultimately led to greater disorder. The number of vendors operating in *jud-phonphon* without health certificates or trading permits has increased (a civil society activist, female, Interview notes, 8 March 2018).

During the interview, the *Thetsakit* division head showed me pictures of eviction sites—images taken before the operations depicted pavements crowded with vendors, while those taken after showed empty streets under law enforcement supervision (Figure 1, 2, 3, and 4). As of May 2018, the BMA and *Thetsakit* had already planned their next master plan to remove additional *jud-phonphan* areas (*Thetsakit* division head, male, Interview notes, 22 May 2018).

Ⅳ. THE IMPACT OF THE BAN

This section examines the impact of the street vending ban through field observations and interviews at six Bangkok vending sites conducted in March, May, and August 2018. These sites were intentionally selected by the author to showcase the diversity, multidimensionality, and interconnected nature of urban space through comparative analysis. Each site has a distinct history and complex political, economic, and social dynamics, shaping an ambiguous

landscape of informality and formality.

The first site, Thonglor (Sukhumvit Soi 38), is a highly modernised area where most vendors have already disappeared. In contrast, the second site, Khlong Toey Market area, represents a traditional neighbourhood where the Bangkokian lifestyle and social relations persist. Both sites have been subjected to the ban but experienced differing impacts due to their distinct contexts — a business centre versus a slum — and oversight by different authority: the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) for Thonglor and the Port Authority of Thailand (PAT) for Khlong Toey.

The third site, a food alley behind Lerdsin Hospital in Bangrak, shows a symbiotic relationship between the hospital and street vendors. Similarly, the fourth site, a street vending space behind Show DC Department Store, was created through collaboration among vendors, a civil society organisation — Ecovillage Transit Asia (ETA), and the department store. Both sites illustrate the interaction and interconnectedness between formal and informal spaces.

The fifth site, Khaosan Road, exemplifies the symbolic politics of the state's legibility project, where state authority was visibly asserted to regulate street vending. However, in practice, its implementation was marked by inconsistencies and contestation. The sixth site, Huai Khwang, provides a detailed account of how the legibility project unfolded over time. Interviews with representatives of the Street Vendors Association (SVA) offer an in-depth perspective on the challenges and contradictions inherent in the government's attempts to formalise and regulate urban informal spaces.

1. Thonglor (Suknumvit Soi 38)

Thonglor is a highly modernised area where most of the street vendors on pavements have been already removed. My observation and interviews with the vendors were conducted on 2 March 2018 at the Sukhumvit Soi (alleyway) 38. When entering the Soi, the most eye-catching scene is the construction sites of condominiums, office complexes and hotels. The contrast between still-remaining old-style buildings and newly built modern constructions is creating an alien environment.
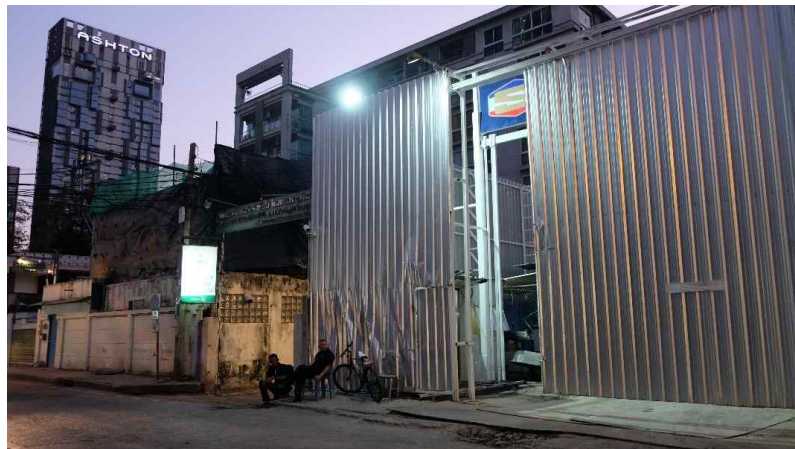

Figure 5. A newly built modern construction, an old-style building, and a construction site on Sukhumvit *Soi* 38 (ⓒ Hanee Kang 2018)

The ban began affecting this area in 2015 when street vending on pavements has been prohibited. Most stalls either relocated indoors or disappeared. Some vendors set up a food court of the ground floor of a residential building, gaining a stable space but struggling with

high monthly rent amid declining sales and customers.

   An elderly woman, who had sold noodle soup on the street for 40 years, said that she was forced to move indoors two years ago. She now pays 15,000 baht (about 450 USD) in monthly rent, but her sales have dropped sharply as her stall is no longer visible from the street. Next to her, a young seafood vendor, also relocated two years ago, said sales have fallen, and rent is high, but he avoids raising prices, fearing further customer loss.

   As street food culture fades, tourist numbers have dropped. A security officer who has lived in Bangkok for 30 years and worked on Soi 38 for three recalled tourists holding decade-old photos, asking where vendors had gone. Similarly, a skewered food vendor of five years remembered when the area was bustling with tourists and noted the sharp decline. A yoghurt seller said she now finishes sales at 7:40 pm, whereas before the ban, she would sell out by 6 pm.

Figure 6. A food court on the ground floor of an residential building set up by the former-street vendors on Sukhumvit Soi 38
(ⓒ Hanee Kang 2018)

However, the government ban is not the only reason for the decline of street food; real estate development also plays a key role. When properties change ownership, vendors are often forced out. A woman who has sold grilled duck on Soi 38 since 1992 stressed that new landlords are another major factor. She currently trades on a pavement in front of a house, paying only for water and electricity, but if the house is sold, the new owner may not allow vendors. A security officer at a construction site on Soi 38 noted that real estate deals are displacing vendors. He pointed to a recently sold pawnshop building, saying, "We don't know what will happen to the vendors in front of it."

2. Khlong Toey Market

Khlong Toey Market, located in Bangkok's oldest and largest slum, is a key hub for urban poor residents and street vendors, offering fresh produce and meat at low prices. My observation and interviews were conducted on 5 March 2018 and focused on stalls inside and in front of the market. The market is busiest at dawn, as vendors buy ingredients around 3 – 4 am, prepare food, and start selling by 6 – 7 am. Inside the market, street vending is allowed from 7 to 11 am, after which vendors must stop or move indoors. On the pavements outside of the market, vending is permitted all day.

The important point is that the BMA is not the government body which regulates pavements in Khlong Toey. Instead, the Port Authority of Thailand (PAT) under the Ministry of Transportation and Communications controls them, as it holds property rights over the

Figure 7. Khlong Toey Market at dawn
(ⓒ Hanee Kang 2018)

market and slum area. This stems from the 1940s when the slum and market developed alongside Khlong Toey Port.[2]

Interviews with vendors confirm that trading on PAT-owned

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2) Historically, Khlong Toey Slum was formed when Khlong Toey Port was built in the 1940s. Migrants from northeastern Thailand, a poor rice-farming region, came to Bangkok to work on the port's construction. Initially, the area was not considered a slum. During the construction process, the workers had rental rights over their houses. The government provided the land, and residents officially paid rent to the authorities.

However, once the port's construction was completed, the government claimed ownership of all the land surrounding the port, including the workers' homes. According to an interview conducted by Tim Elliott (2013), Ash Barker, a social activist in Khlong Toey Slum, stated, "One day they were legally renting; the next day they were squatters." Barker believes that the lack of legal rights is one of the biggest challenges faced by slum residents.

The workers quite literally became illegal occupiers of public land overnight. When their labour was needed, they were 'accepted' as residents, but once they were no longer useful, they were labelled as squatters. Their residential area was officially designated as a slum due to the government's revocation of recognition. As part of its plans to develop new residential and commercial districts, the PAT soon began efforts to evict people from the newly designated 'slum'—a concept shaped by government intent.

pavements is allowed if rent is paid. A fruit vendor stated that PAT still permits vending but expressed uncertainty about the future, saying, "If PAT changes its policy or sells the land, we may have to leave, and finding a new place won't be easy." Similarly, an elderly flower vendor noted that her area has not yet been affected by the ban.

Another flower vendor shared a unique case where PAT mediated a dispute between a landowner and street vendors. She had been selling flowers on private land owned by a new mall developer, who initially wanted her removed. Unable to find another location, she remained after PAT intervened and persuaded the landowner to let her stay.

Although this area has largely retained its traditional street vending style, real estate development has brought notable changes. The pavements in front of the market have undergone two contrasting transformations. According to a middle-aged fruit vendor, some vendors have benefited from increased pedestrian traffic following the construction of nearby condominiums. However, others have been displaced as new malls were built, with mall owners requesting PAT to remove street stalls to ensure clear access for customers.

As a result, an intriguing contrast can now be observed, as shown in Figures 8 and 9: one block remains bustling with street vendors, while the adjacent block, dominated by a new mall, is completely devoid of them. This stark juxtaposition creates a striking patchwork in the urban landscape, a pattern commonly found throughout the Khlong Toey area.

Figure 8. Pavement with street stalls in front of Khlong Toey Market (ⓒ Hanee Kang 2018)

Figure 9. Pavement without street stalls in front of a newly built mall (ⓒ Hanee Kang 2018)

3. Bangrak (A Food Alley behind Lerdsin Hospital)

Bangrak is a vibrant residential and commercial area that has retained much of Bangkok's traditional lifestyle. Observations and interviews were conducted at *Si Wiang Soi,* behind Lerdsin Hospital, on 6 March and 6 August 2018. While the main road is subject to the street vending ban, the *Soi* remains largely unaffected. The main restriction is a ban on business operations every Monday for cleaning, with vendors required to pay a 100-baht fine if they trade that day. Compared to other central districts, regulations are more lenient, and both vendors and residents seem unconcerned about sudden enforcement or eviction.

Despite restrictions, *Si Wiang Soi* illustrates the blurred boundary between formal and informal spaces. While some vendors have been displaced due to pavement and private property bans, many continue operating in grey areas through informal arrangements. A coconut

snack vendor pays a small fee to a hotel for space, while a chicken noodle vendor continues trading on the pavement under a public hospital fence after being asked to relocate from the pavement in front of a private clinic.

According to the vendors, *Thetsakit* officers oversee the area, but enforcement is sporadic, often resolved through negotiation. A long-time fruit vendor said his familiarity with officers allows him to operate on pavements without issue, though newcomers would struggle. These personal ties between vendors and enforcement officers are crucial to business stability in the Soi. Bribing law enforcement was the norm across Bangkok until the ban was strictly enforced in 2015 (civil society activists, Interview notes, 2 March 2018).

Figure 10. Street stalls on the food alley at the back of the Lerdsin Hospital (*Si Wiang Soi*) (ⓒ Hanee Kang 2018)

This area illustrates the symbiotic relationship between the hospital and street vendors, showing how they coexist to meet local needs. The food stalls primarily serve hospital staff, patients, and visitors, offering affordable and convenient meals. On Mondays, when street food stalls must close for cleaning, the hospital provides an indoor space for vendors to continue operating for a daily fee of 100 baht. A middle-aged noodle vendor confirmed that vendors use this space every Monday by paying the fee.

However, this symbiotic relationship is now at risk. On my second visit on 6 October 2018, I saw a newly opened permanent food court in the hospital's ground-floor open space, which had not been there during my visit on 6 March 2018. Operated by a large corporation, it requires customers to buy coupons at the entrance for use at vendor stalls. As a result, hospital staff and visitors who once bought food from street vendors outside are now dining here instead.

Interestingly, the food court imitates traditional street vendor setups with similar tables and chairs. Unlike the *Thonglor* food court, where independent sellers rent space (See section IV-1), vendors here are employees. A middle-aged woman selling rice bowls confirmed in an interview that she commutes daily from the suburbs and previously worked at a restaurant but left due to the lack of break time. While designed to resemble a street food market, this space is, in reality, a corporatised and formalised food environment.

4. RAMA IX Road (behind Show DC Department Store)

Show DC is a large department store in central Bangkok. Behind

it, on Rama IX Road, is a small plot of land once privately owned but later donated to the BMA. About 10 street food vendors now occupy the space, paying 500-baht monthly rent to the BMA. My observation and interviews were conducted on 8 March 2018.

Unlike the previous three case study locations, vendors here are not on pavements and thus not affected by the street vending ban. However, in a group interview, they expressed concern that the BMA might repurpose the land for more profitable uses or sell it to a private owner. During the department store's construction, street vendors displaced by the street vending ban from areas like Sukhumvit Road gathered to sell food to workers. After construction ended, they continued operating on nearby pavements, but complaints from new condominium owners led to government intervention, forcing them to relocate.

Figure 11. Show DC department store (Source: W Workspace website)

At that time, Ecovillage Transit Asia (ETA), in collaboration with Show DC and later the Thailand Research Foundation, launched an

action research project to support community organising among
vendors. ETA collected applications from local vendors to join the
project, which aimed to improve the sustainability of their livelihoods.
The project began with savings groups and infrastructure
improvements, such as installing roofs and tents. It later expanded
to promoting a positive public image of the vending area as a
community asset by maintaining cleanliness, creating green spaces,
and providing a welcoming space for the neighbourhood.

Figure 12. Street stalls on Rama IX road, behind the Show DC
department store (ⓒ Hanee Kang 2018)

According to ETA's survey, 70% of customers are Show DC
employees－security officers, cleaners, salespeople, and office
workers－while motorcycle taxi drivers make up the remaining 30%.
Many employees cannot afford to eat inside the department store,
leading Show DC management to recognise the value of street
vendors. In collaboration with ETA, Show DC has supported them
by providing water and electricity as part of the action research
project.

However, declining sales at Show DC have led to employee layoffs, negatively affecting vendors' livelihoods. Their relationship with the department store is symbiotic—when sales drop, so do vendors' incomes. Despite concerns, vendors remain optimistic, saying, "Yes, we are worried, but not too much. We will find a way, as we always have." In response, they are creating brochures to attract more customers and sustain their businesses.

5. Khaosan Road

Khaosan Road holds symbolic significance as one of the most famous destinations for visitors to Thailand. On 1 August 2018, a "Big Cleaning Day" event was held on this iconic tourist street. City officials, residents, vendors, and volunteers participated in cleaning and organising the area (Prachachat News 2018). However, this event was not merely about cleanliness; it served as a symbolic initiation of the city's crackdown on street vending. The removal of vendors was framed as a necessary step in modernising Bangkok's urban landscape, reinforcing the state's vision of order and control. This date also marks the effective beginning of a ban on vending on pavements.

Street vendors, while explicitly opposing the city's anti-vending policy through collective actions such as marches (Saksornchai 2018a), actively participated in the cleaning event to emphasise that Khaosan Road could remain clean even with their continued presence (Saksornchai 2018b). While the city government sought to dissociate street vendors from the history of Khaosan, framing them as obstacles

to be removed in the pursuit of a cleaner urban environment, the vendors, in contrast, positioned themselves as key actors who had shaped the history of Khaosan Road and could continue to contribute to the identity of a "cleaner" Khaosan Road in the future.

Figure 13. Big Cleaning Day on Khaosan Road (Source: Prachachat News 2018)

The policy shift on Khaosan Road was not premeditated but rather abrupt. Initially, the area was exempt from vending restrictions, reflecting its unique role in Bangkok's tourism economy. However, its sudden inclusion in the crackdown suggests the influence of political actors. Some believe it became a sudden target due to Then-Deputy Governor of Bangkok Sakoltee Phattiyakul's personal drive (A civil society leader, female, Interview notes, 2 August 2018). The abrupt operation also lacked coordination among Bangkok authorities.

When I visited Khaosan Road at 6:30 PM on August 1, journalists were waiting for potential clashes. A reporter explained that Thetsakit ordered vendors to move to the street from pavements, allowing sales from 6 PM to midnight, while the police threatened arrests, as pavements fall under *Thetsakit's* authority and streets under the police. Amid this confusion, *Thetsakit* and the police agreed to reassess the policy within a week, ending the first day in uncertainty (Sanook news 2018).

However, this debate over vendors' physical location is secondary to a larger issue: the symbolic redefinition of Khaosan Road by the state. More than a logistical matter, the removal of street vendors reflects the state's legibility and simplification project (Scott 1998), where the BMA redefined Khaosan from a historically diverse space into a binary of order and disorder. Vendors, who shaped Khaosan's unique character, were framed as obstacles to modernisation, while the state positioned itself as the agent of cleanliness, order, and safety. The state's intervention did not merely seek to regulate vendors but to reconstruct urban space in a way that privileged bureaucratic authority over historical continuity.

The Thai state's regulation of street vendors has continued through 2024, with recent policies restricting eligibility to low-income Thai nationals with welfare cards, excluding those earning over 300,000 baht (about 9,000 USD) annually. Vendors must now pay taxes and report income, and those exceeding a monthly revenue threshold are required to relocate to rented spaces. Governor Chadchart Sittipunt has reiterated plans to phase out street vending and relocate vendors to designated commercial areas, similar to Singapore's hawker centre

model (Boyle 2024).

Through these measures, the state continues to assert control over both poverty and urban aesthetics. The legibility project in banning street vendors extends beyond spatial reconfiguration; it functions as a form of discursive politics that assigns specific identities to urban actors. Street vendors, once integral to Bangkok's urban community, have been redefined as obstacles to be eliminated and subsequently erased from the city's historical narrative. Even Bangkok's most iconic street, Khaosan Road, has not been exempt from this process.

The erasure of vendors did not merely empty the streets; it restructured commercial space in favour of capitalist actors. As street stalls disappear, modern convenience stores, chain restaurants, and corporate establishments are taking their place. This transition was not simply an incidental shift but an intentional restructuring of urban commercial spaces, privileging corporate actors over informal economies. The very identity of Khaosan Road, once shaped by the dynamism of street vendors, has been rebranded to fit within a neoliberal vision of urban order.

6. Huai Khwang

Street vendor associations have increasingly emerged across Bangkok as a reaction to the government's vending ban (Boonjubun 2017). On 7 August 2018, I visited Huai Khwang district and interviewed leaders of the Street Vendor Association to understand the concrete processes of state's legibility project and vendors' responses. According to leaders, the Street Vendor Association unites

representatives from 27 districts. Initially, vendors in each district filed petitions separately to the People's Complaint Centre. However, they formed a network to strengthen their negotiation power, supported by HomeNet, an organisation advocating for informal sector workers' rights and social protection, particularly for home-based workers and street vendors. Through regular meetings, they strategise, negotiate, and take collective action to engage authorities.

Figure 14. The location proposed by the government for relocation.
(ⓒ Hanee Kang 2018)

The association's president emphasised that their network was not solely for resistance but also a platform for structured negotiation. While acknowledging state policies, they sought coexistence, pushed for policy changes, and monitored relocation processes. Their advocacy focused on three key areas. First, they engaged authorities, having formed their network in 2017, negotiating with the BMA and

city council to maintain 232 *Jud-phonphan* areas and reinstate revoked zones. Second, they highlighted vendors' economic and social roles, arguing they are significant consumers in agricultural industry, provide food for commuters, and contribute significantly to the economy. They warned that a sudden ban could cause financial crises, debt defaults, and broader economic repercussions. Third, they raised public awareness through The Truth About Street Vendors, a Facebook page. Initially, many dismissed the issue, but as access to affordable food and goods diminished, public sentiment shifted in favour of vendors (one of the leaders of the Street Vendor Association, male, Interview notes, 7 August 2018).

While street vendors sought engagement, the government continued enforcing displacement policies. In Huai Khwang, the government proposed relocating vendors to the second floor of an empty market, but they refused as it was too isolated from pedestrian traffic. Vendors had previously operated on the main road every Tuesday but were relocated to an alley when street vending was banned. Initially, they complied, believing it would not significantly affect business. However, as the weekly market faded, foot traffic declined, reducing commercial activity. Many vendors left－some managed to find new locations, rented spaces, or lost their livelihoods. Though the relocation seemed minor, its impact was substantial. These failures illustrate the state's reliance on spatial reordering to manage informality without addressing its economic and social effects.

The removal of vendors was not just about order－it was about rewriting urban space. Unlike the state's legibility project, which frames street vendors as illegal and abnormal through discursive

politics, vending has historically been part of Bangkok's economy and social fabric, with the state previously recognising them. By revoking long-standing permits and halting tax collection, the state erased its prior recognition of vendors, reconstructing them as illegal actors (See Van Schendel and Abraham 2005).

District leaders stressed this recognition, stating, "We have been working as street vendors for over 30 years, and the government even issued permits acknowledging us as legitimate business operators." They showed me permits allowing them to trade in public spaces. These were renewed annually, with the next renewal scheduled for April 2018. However, in January 2018－months before renewal－ vendors were suddenly prohibited from continuing their businesses.

Additionally, according to the district leaders, they had been paying monthly taxes of 200－300 baht. Previously, tax collection was based on vending area size, but this system was abruptly abolished. The government not only stopped collecting taxes but refused payments when vendors attempted to comply. This was not merely bureaucratic restructuring－it was a calculated move to erase formal recognition of vending, reinforcing the state's claim that vendors were never part of the legitimate urban economy.

Hygiene regulations were systematically managed by the government; operating a food stall required training certifications and health permits. The Ministry of Public Health conducted inspections and enforced sanitation standards. However, these regulations were recently abandoned, and vending was abruptly criminalised. As a result, unregulated vendors without hygiene certifications began selling food. As Lomnitz (1988) noted, the more a social system is

bureaucratically formalised and regulated—yet fails to fully meet social demands—the more informal mechanisms emerge outside the system. In this case, what was framed as an effort to establish order instead generated greater disorder.

For decades, a regulatory system governed street vending, yet the state now strategically denies this reality. This erasure occurs through two mechanisms. First, the Thai government portrays vending regulations as if they previously existed in a vacuum, justifying their removal. Second, new bureaucratic procedures force vendors to depend on government approval for legitimacy. The long-standing system was dismantled and replaced with categories such as *Jud-phonphan* and *Jud-phonphon*, creating uncertainty and anxiety among vendors concerned about exclusion.

These registration, enforcement, and eviction processes have unfolded unevenly across districts. Even highly experienced vendors, apprehensive of losing the opportunity to register legally, felt compelled to apply for certain government procedures under new systems. Ironically, the government then used their participation as evidence that vendors endorsed these policies, despite the coercive conditions forcing them to comply (one of the leaders of the Street Vendor Association, female, Interview notes, 7 August 2018).

Ultimately, rather than creating order, these measures deepened instability, increased disorder, and exacerbated inequalities. By dismantling informal structures without sustainable alternatives, the state not only disrupted livelihoods but also reinforced its authority by dictating who belongs in the urban economy and under what conditions.

Ⅴ. RETHINKING URBAN INFORMALITY: POWER, POLICY, AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF PUBLIC SPACES

The six sites of case study collectively reveal that the vending ban was not a uniform process but rather an uneven, negotiated, and at times contradictory intervention shaped by power struggles among the state, urban elites, civil society, and street vendors themselves. The preceding sections revealed the complexities of power dynamics and the diverse patterns present in urban informality. This section synthesises the main findings in three key points and discusses their policy implications.

1. The dialectical relationship of differentiation and equalisation in capitalism

The research findings highlight the dialectical interplay of differentiation and equalisation within capitalism (Smith 1984; Havey 1982, 1989) as a driving force behind the banning policy, which has contributed to the disappearance of street vending spaces in Bangkok. Capitalism's differentiating force creates and sustains diverse urban spaces, including informal ones, as mechanisms to absorb surplus capital and facilitate the development of formal urban structures. Urban informal spaces, such as street vending sites, provide essential goods, food, and services to urban populations, thereby facilitating the functioning and growth of a modern city.

However, as capitalist development advances, the equalising force begins to dominate over the differentiating force. This equalisation process does not merely replace social diversity and irregularities with uniformity and order; it actively operates through the standardisation and regulation of urban spaces to align with capitalist imperatives. For example, the state's legibility project and the logic of modernisation impose spatial uniformity by eliminating irregular and informal spaces, while simultaneously enforcing strict regulations to facilitate the efficient circulation of capital.
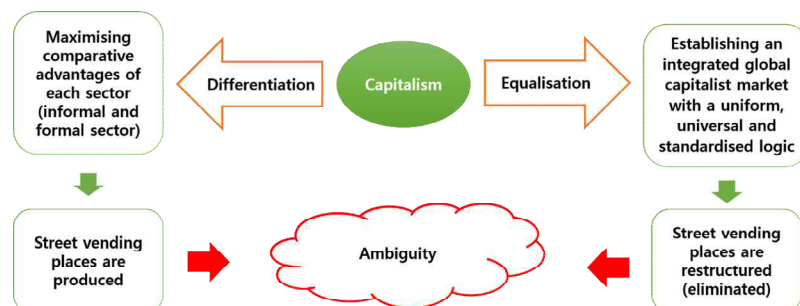

Figure 15. Dialectic of differentiation and equalisation of capitalism in production and restructuring of street vending places

In Bangkok, the state's emphasis on hygiene, cleanliness, and order under the logic of modernity exemplifies this equalisation process. Pavements that were previously occupied by street vendors are cleared and regulated to create visually and functionally standardised spaces catering to middle-class expectations and commercial interests. As Smith (1984) argues, equalisation functions as a mechanism to reconfigure spaces to meet capitalist demands, involving the imposition of uniform standards while marginalising or erasing

non-conforming informal spaces. This prioritisation of formal over informal spaces reflects the deeper dynamics of uneven geographical development in urban settings.

The dialectic of differentiation and equalisation further drives capital accumulation within the "built environment (Harvey 2012)", particularly in urban spaces. The built environment, as Harvey explains, represents a fixed form of capital investment, encompassing infrastructure, buildings, and urban systems that facilitate the circulation and accumulation of capital. However, the rigidity of the built environment also creates crises of overaccumulation, which necessitate periodic restructuring. This restructuring often takes the form of creative destruction (Harvey 2006), where existing urban informal spaces, such as street vending areas, are demolished or reconfigured to make way for formal, profit-driven spaces.

This geographical concentration of capital frequently results in "accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2003)," as the removal or transformation of informal spaces displaces marginalised groups and reallocates resources toward elite-controlled formal spaces. In the context of this discussion, capital is concentrated and accumulated in urban formal spaces by displacing and dismantling urban informal spaces, such as street vending sites. This process exemplifies accumulation by dispossession within both urban formal and informal spaces, reinforcing the uneven geographical development of cities. It highlights how the reconfiguration of the built environment under capitalism privileges formal spaces aligned with state and capitalist interests, while marginalising the informal sectors that traditionally served diverse urban populations.
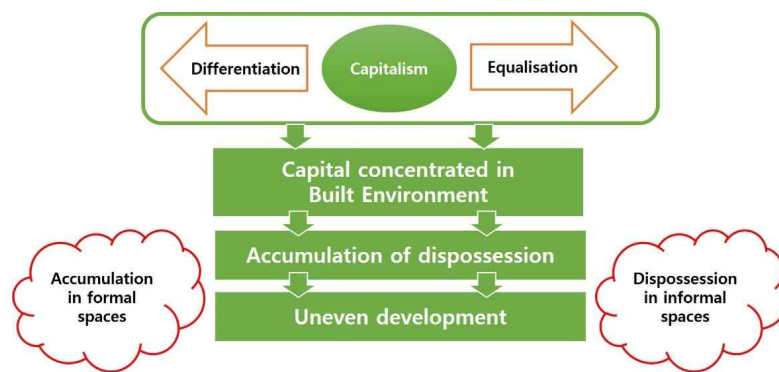
Figure 16. Accumulation by dispossession in urban formal and informal spaces

However, a more significant point is that uneven development has not only shaped and restructured the physical spaces of urban informality but also conceptualised and redefined the notion of urban informality itself. This concept has been created and continually modified by the capitalist state. Although laws and policies regulating street vending in Bangkok have long existed, these spaces were not historically regarded as informal or illegal during the development of modern Bangkok over the past few decades. However, when the government chose to label these spaces as "informal," they were abruptly rendered informal and, by extension, illegal. This labelling strategy reflects a form of governmentality, aligning with Smith's notion of uneven development, where the state redefines urban spaces to prioritise capitalist interests, often at the expense of informal spaces.

2. The dynamics of power relations in urban informality

The disappearance of street vendors in Bangkok is driven by the actions of three key groups: the capitalist state, urban financial elites (including private developers), and the growing middle class.

Firstly, the Thai capitalist state has been the primary actor in producing and restructuring urban public spaces through the enforcement of the street vending ban. Additionally, the state has played a central role in conceptualising and redefining the notion of urban informality. When informal spaces were deemed necessary for providing services to the urban poor, the state actively promoted them. However, when these spaces were no longer needed, the state reclassified them as "informal" and "illegal," subsequently removing them.

Secondly, urban financial and entrepreneurial elites, including developers and capitalists, have significantly contributed to the restructuring of urban spaces by altering land use and displacing street vendors. Street vendors are often forced to vacate due to real estate transactions, as newly acquired buildings or plots of land are repurposed by their owners. The proprietors of newly constructed condominiums, office complexes, and hotels frequently petition the government to remove vendors in order to maintain cleaner and more accessible pavements in front of their properties. These demands have been identified as a key driving force behind the government's ban on street vending.

Thirdly, the growing middle class has also played a crucial role in reshaping urban geography. The middle class's demand for

unimpeded access to public spaces has been another significant factor driving the ban. While street vending was an integral part of Bangkok's culture and lifestyle during the city's modernisation from the 1950s to the 1990s, this dynamic began to shift in the 2000s as the middle-class population expanded (Maneepong and Walsh 2013; Boonjubun 2017). Changes in lifestyle and social preferences have contributed to the disappearance of street vending. Furthermore, major civil society organisations have largely refrained from actively opposing the street vending ban, as middle-class discourse has become a dominant trend within civil society.

3. Reconceptualising Urban Informality: Ambiguity, Interconnectedness, and Unplanned Development

Field observations and interviews conducted at six street vending sites in Bangkok illustrate the critical importance of considering diversity, interconnectedness, and ambiguity when analysing the production and restructuring (creative destruction) of urban informal spaces, as well as when formulating policy solutions. The findings suggest a conceptual flaw in the singular approach that views street vending in Bangkok as "purely informal" and therefore "illegal." Such a perspective risks oversimplifying complexities and overlooking the power dynamics operating beneath the surface.

This paper challenges the notion of urban informality as an organising logic that functions as a form of governmentality and proposes a reconceptualisation of urban informality. It advocates understanding urban informality as a realm of ambiguity and

messiness, as well as a space of interaction between formal and informal elements in Asian cities.

Based on the findings, I argue that the Thai government's definition of urban informality associated with the ban is partial and incomplete, failing to adequately reflect the realities and complexities of street vending spaces in Bangkok. Consequently, I caution against viewing urban informality as an all-encompassing concept. Instead, I emphasise the need to reconceptualise urban informality through the lens of unplanned development, a concept advanced by Jonathan Rigg (2012, 2016).

In his book, Challenging Southeast Asian Development: The Shadows of Success (2016), Rigg identifies four dimensions of poverty: the residual poor, the unequal poor, the produced poor, and the invisible or uncounted poor. This classification was developed to capture the diverse historical contexts and political-economic systems that have shaped and reshaped the realities of poverty.

Similarly, street vending spaces in Bangkok cannot be reduced to a monolithic concept of informality. These spaces are not merely sites of economic exchange but also complex arenas where formal and informal practices intersect, producing diverse spatial arrangements and meanings. The categorisation of spaces as 'formal' or 'informal' often oversimplifies the layered realities of these environments. Just as Rigg's typology of poverty emphasises the need to understand the diverse and dynamic nature of poverty, the concept of urban informality must also accommodate the multiplicity of street vending spaces, which often resist clear-cut classifications and demonstrate fluid interactions between planned and unplanned developments.

Just as poverty cannot be understood through a singular lens, neither can informality. Addressing the issues created by uneven urban development requires moving beyond fragmented conceptualisations of informality and adopting site- and context-specific approaches. By incorporating the perspective of unplanned development, urban development can account for the diversity and ambiguity within "informalities," while also recognising the symbiotic relationships between formality and informality.

4. Further research directions

This paper has sought to address the research question of how and why urban public spaces−both formal and informal−have been restructured in the context of disappearing street vending in Bangkok. To this end, I identified the forces and actors driving this phenomenon. The study began with an exploration of Bangkok's modernisation process and the historical evolution of urban informality, providing a backdrop for understanding the current dynamics. The core policies and approaches adopted by the Thai government concerning street vending were also revisited.

The research findings reveal that the dialectical relationship between differentiation and equalisation within capitalism is a key force behind the disappearance of street vending spaces in Bangkok. Additionally, three primary actors were identified: the capitalist state, urban financial elites (including private developers), and the growing middle class.

Recognising the limitations of viewing urban informality as an

all-encompassing concept or responding with singular, uniform approaches, I emphasise the need to reconceptualise urban informality. A shift towards understanding informality through the lens of unplanned development, which is inherently site- and context-specific, is essential for addressing the complexities and dynamics of urban public spaces.

The banning of street vending in Bangkok is not a temporary measure but a policy deeply rooted in broader urban governance, informal space management, and power structures. The enforcement of this ban in 2018 marked a pivotal moment in the spatial restructuring of the city, reflecting the contested nature of urban public space. This study has examined the initial social reactions and policy consequences emerging from this regulatory shift. However, a more comprehensive understanding of the evolving dynamics of urban informality requires further research beyond this early phase. Future studies should incorporate continuous observation to track subsequent policy shifts and their long-term effects. Additionally, comparative studies with similar cases in other cities would offer valuable insights into how informal urban spaces are reconfigured under different socio-political contexts.

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<국문초록>

불균등하고 비계획적인 발전 공간으로서의
도시 비공식성: 방콕 노점상 금지 조치 사례

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포스트-이원론적 도시 이론가들은 도시 비공식성을 사회적, 정치적, 역사적 구성물로 개념화하며, 도시의 불균등한 발전 과정에서 복잡한 권력 관계를 드러낼 잠재력을 가진 개념으로 간주해 왔다. 이 논문은 방콕의 노점상 공간에 초점을 맞추어, 도시 비공식 공간의 생산과 재구조화(창조적 파괴) 뒤에 작용하는 힘과 행위자를 분석하며 포스트-이원론적 논의를 확장한다. 세계 최고의 길거리 음식 도시로 알려진 방콕이지만, 이러한 공간은 2014년 쿠데타 이후 정부의 금지 조치와 가속화된 근대화 프로젝트로 인해 심각한 압력을 받고 있다. 이 논문은 노점상 공간의 점진적인 소멸이라는 맥락에서, 이러한 도시 비공식 공간이 어떻게 그리고 왜 재구조화되었는지를 조사한다. 저자는 도시 비공식성을 통치성(governmentality)의 한 형태로 작동하는 조직 논리로 이해하는 관점을 비판하면서, 도시 비공식성을 모호함과 혼란의 영역이자 아시아 도시에서 공식성과 비공식성이 상호작용하는 공간으로 새롭게 개념화할 것을 제안한다. 이를 위해 방콕의 근대화 과정에서 도시 비공식성이 수행한 역할과 태국 정부의 노점상 금지 정책 및 그 다양한 영향을 분석한다. 방콕 내 6개의 노점상 지역에서 실시한 현장 관찰과 인터뷰를 바탕으로, 연구 결과는 도시 공공 공간의 재구조화를 분석하고 정책

적 해결책을 모색하는 데 있어 다양성, 상호연결성, 모호성을 고려하는 것이 중요함을 보여준다. 연구 결과, 자본주의에서 차별화와 균등화 간의 변증법적 관계가 방콕에서 노점상 공간의 소멸을 초래한 주요 원동력임을 시사한다. 이 과정에서 주요 행위자로는 자본주의 국가, 도시 금융 엘리트(개발업자), 그리고 성장하는 중산층이 확인되었다. 이 논문은 도시 비공식성을 포괄적 개념으로 이해하는 데 따른 한계를 인식하며, 이를 장소 및 맥락에 특화된 방식으로 나타나는 비계획적 발전(unplanned development)의 관점에서 재개념화할 필요성을 강조한다.

주제어: 도시 비공식성, 불균등 발전, 비계획적 발전, 창조적 파괴, 노점상 금지 조치, 방콕, 태국